CHANGING FACE OF AID IN AFRICA

Outlook, failures, and reform potential

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Abstract

The year 2025 has been marked deepening aid cuts by major donors This briefing note examines the implications of these cuts on Africa's development, highlighting long-standing failures in official development assistance (ODA) to reduce poverty, inequality, and climate vulnerability. It analyses ODA trends across sectors, gaps in support to Least Developed Countries and women's rights organizations, and the misalignment with aid effectiveness principles. The paper calls for reforming aid systems to centre equity, strengthen country ownership, and rebuild global cooperation grounded in justice and solidarity.

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For further information on the issues raised in this paper please email advocacy@oxfaminternational.org

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Cover photo: Women participants of the Regreening Africa project showcase processed néré seeds. The initiative, funded by the European Union, supports smallholder farmers to restore degraded land by growing and preserving trees such as néré and shea. By strengthening these local value chains, the project enhances livelihoods, diversifies income sources, and builds household resilience to climate change /Diafara Traoré].

Introduction

The recent announcements of significant cuts to aid budgets by major donor governments is projected to result in a total decline of United States dollar (US$) 31.1 billion in aid for 2025 among 17 of the largest Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) donors.[1] Some notable budget cuts include the United States, which is planning to implement a drastic 90 percent reduction in its aid,[2] while the United Kingdom plans to scale back its aid budget from the current 0.5 percent of gross national income (GNI) to just 0.3 percent by 2027.[3] Similarly, France intends to slash its public development aid by up to 40 percent as part of a broader euro (€) 32 billion budget reduction planned for 2025.[4] This decline is expected to continue in subsequent years and will impact humanitarian action, health, food security, education, and climate change, among other areas, in low- and middle-income countries and particularly those in Africa.[5]

The deepening cuts to official development assistance (ODA) highlight the fragility of the global aid system. Even prior to this moment of crisis, global ODA levels were too low, meeting only half of the global commitment of 0.7 percent of GNI.[6] At this critical juncture, it is important to highlight the long-standing challenges that have existed with ODA in Africa to better understand the roots of the current crisis facing Africa in the wake of aid cuts. This brief, drawing on the analysis conducted by the Reality of Aid in Africa Network on aid trends in Africa as of 2022[7], lays out some of the critical challenges that have existed for some years with ODA in the continent. It further posits the impact of the current ODA budget cuts to Africa based on the findings of the research.

ODA has fallen short in effectively addressing poverty and inequality in sub-Saharan Africa and the world over

The OECD DAC officially defines ODA with the main objectives of promoting the economic development and welfare of low-and middle-income countries, and this was advanced by the Millenium Development Goal 8 and the Monterey Consensus, which recognised the crucial role of aid in poverty eradication. Aligning ODA with these goals ensures it directly contributes to global justice, sustainable development, and the fulfilment of basic human rights.

This section examines four dimensions of ODA disbursement that reveal how ODA has not been effectively contributing to poverty and inequality reduction and how further aid cuts will retrench these gaps: 1) ODA is leaving behind those living in Least Developed Countries (LDCs); 2) ODA is not reaching critical sectors for poverty and inequality reduction; 3) ODA is not reaching women's rights organizations and not effectively addressing gender inequality; and 4)Aid cuts threaten hard-won gains made to mobilize climate financing for developing countries and will exacerbate inequality in climate action.

1. Growing disparity in ODA is leaving Least Developed Countries (LDCs) behind amidst rising levels of poverty

The concentration of people living in extreme poverty within LDCs has increased dramatically—from 31 percent in 2010 to 50 percent in 2020—and is expected to rise to 57 percent in 2025.[8] Despite this, ODA to LDCs has not increased accordingly, stalling at around US$30 billion since 2010,[9] and LDCs receive a relatively smaller share of ODA compared to lower- and upper-middle-income countries. In 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic, overall, ODA increased by 3.5 percent, but ODA to LDCs only increased by 1.8 percent.[10] In 2023, average ODA from DAC countries for in-donor refugees was nearly the same as all ODA directed to LDCs.[11]

An example of this striking disparity is the difference between ODA flows to Kenya, a country classified as a lower-middle-income country and Malawi, the fourth-poorest country in the world. In Malawi, an estimated 70 percent of the population, 13 million people,[12] live on less than US$2.15 per day as of 2019. In 2021, the country received US$811.4 million in ODA.[13] Comparatively, Kenya, where an estimated 33.6 percent of the population or 15 million people live below the national poverty line,[14] received approximately 352 percent more ODA the same year (2021) at US$3.67 billion[15] despite only having 15 percent more people living under the poverty line.[16]

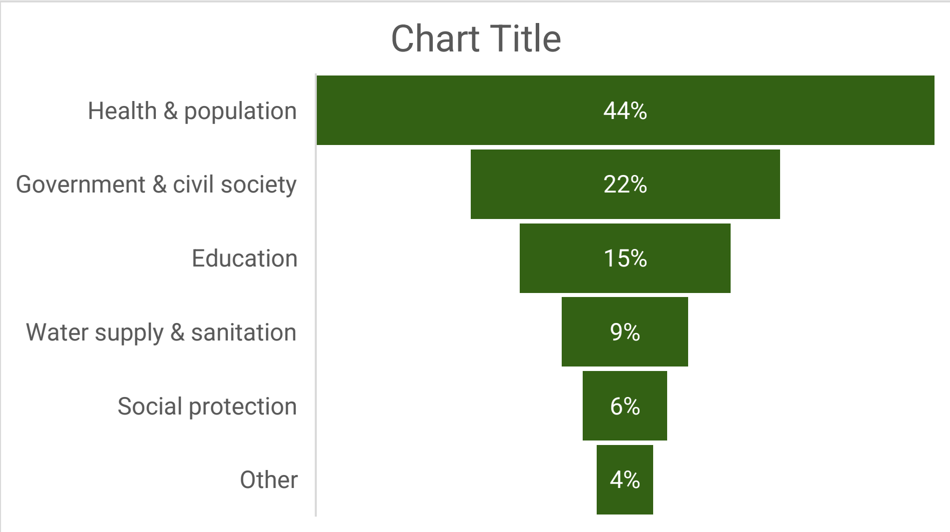
ODA to African LDCs account for only 0.06 percent of OECD-DAC GNI,[17] highlighting the global failure to meet the commitment of the Istanbul Programme of providing between 0.15 to 0.20 percent of OECD-DAC GNI to these countries as well as the long-standing commitment by donor countries to provide 0.7 percent of their respective GNI.[18] LDCs often experience various challenges in accessing all forms of financing, and ODA is a major source of external finance as a proportion of their government budgets.[19] The impending ODA budget cuts will severely impact development progress in Africa, which has the highest concentration of LDCs, and they are already underfunded.

2. Bilateral ODA has not effectively targeted poverty reduction. Cuts to ODA would further deepen funding gaps to sectors critical to reducing poverty and inequality

The 2024 Development Cooperation report shows that in 2022, only 9.5 percent of bilateral ODA globally went toward grants in sectors identified in the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 1 to end poverty.[20] In Africa, the top three sectors for ODA allocations on average between 2018 and 2023 were economic infrastructure (an average 15 percent of total ODA between 2018 and 2023), humanitarian aid (an average 13 percent of total ODA), and health, reproductive health, and population programmes and services (an average 20 percent of total ODA), which accounted for an average 48 percent of all ODA allocations.[21] In contrast, critical poverty-reducing sectors such as education, agriculture, water and sanitation, and social protection sectors only received a combined 20 percent of ODA allocation on average between 2018 and 2023.[22]

A more focused review of the ODA data between 2018 and 2023 in Africa shows that an average of 45 percent of total ODA to the continent was allocated to social infrastructure and services. During this period, on average, most of the ODA classified as social infrastructure and services was concentrated in health-related spending (44 percent) and not reaching other important sectors such as social protection (6 percent), education (15 percent), and water and sanitation (9 percent) (see Figure 1).[23] The share of health-related ODA has remained consistently highest among sectors classified as social infrastructure and services, pre-COVID-19 and after, with slight increases between 2020 (42 percent) and 2022 (46 percent).[24] In 2023 a little over US$15.5 billion was allocated to health, reproductive health, and population programmes and services, while the combined ODA allocation to education, water and sanitation, and social protection sectors combined was lower at US$11.7 billion (US$5.9 billion to education, US$2.8 billion to water and sanitation, and US$2.9 billion to social protection).[25]

Figure 1: Average five-year sectoral distribution of ODA classified as social infrastructure and services in Africa, 2018–2023



Source: Authors' calculation based on OECD Common Reporting Standard (CRS) data

Notes: A funnel chart showing the percentage allocation of total ODA classified as social infrastructure and services reflects higher concentration in health-related spending (44 percent) in comparison to other important sectors such as social protection (6 percent), education (15 percent), and water and sanitation (9 percent).

While the health sector has historically received a disproportionately large share of the social infrastructure and services ODA in Africa, this should not suggest that it has been overfunded. Health financing remains essential, particularly for countries with fragile health systems. The concern lies in the chronic underfunding of other equally vital sectors such as education, water and sanitation, and social protection, which are critical for tackling poverty and building long-term resilience.

Alarmingly, external health aid to Africa is projected to decline by up to 70 percent in 2025 compared to financing levels in 2021[26] as a result of aid cuts by the United States and other key donors. These cuts threaten to disrupt essential health programmes and could lead to devastating shortages of lifesaving medicines and critical health resources in African countries, while funding for other sectors critical to poverty alleviation remains too low.

3. Aid cuts will negatively impact efforts to reduce gender equality, widening existing gaps in gender-disaggregated data and weakening the capacity and influence of domestic women's right organizations (WROs)

Africa received approximately one-third of all global ODA that has gender equality as an objective, with a promising 13 percent of ODA to Africa between 2020 and 2021 including gender equality as an objective.[27] This is significantly higher than the global average of 4 percent and is the highest share in any region globally.[28] However, the OECD-DAC's current data reporting mechanisms only show whether gender equality is a primary or significant objective, or not an objective at all within a project. The gender marker fails to capture the effectiveness of the gender equality intervention and does not provide details on the specific gender equality goals—such as women's employment, care work, or education—that are being pursued within projects.

Moreover, even with the rise in gender-related ODA to the continent over the years, the proportion allocated to WROs remains critically low in Africa. Between 2018 and 2022, a dismally low average of 0.4 percent of ODA went to WROs in the region while only 11 percent of gender-focused ODA was channeled through local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), compared to the 54 percent channeled through donor agencies.[29] Globally, WROs receive only 0.13 percent of total official development assistance and 0.4 percent of all gender-related aid.[30]

These gaps toward gender equality will worsen as overall ODA levels fall. Moreover, some rich governments' recent policies to restrict global funding for women's reproductive health and funding for gender-related programming will negatively impact gender equality goals as well as funding to WROs in Africa.[31]

4. Aid cuts threaten hard-won gains made to mobilize climate financing for developing countries and will exacerbate inequality in climate action, especially for African countries

Rich countries consistently fail to honor their international finance commitments, which fall far short of the needs of low-and middle-income countries. Oxfam's analysis shows that these countries missed the $100 billion annual climate finance target in 2020, 2021, and 2022.

In 2020, rich countries reported providing $68.3 billion in public climate finance, with a total of $83.3 billion including mobilized private finance. However, Oxfam estimates the "true value" of this contribution was only $21–$24.5 billion[32]. In 2021, reported climate finance remained at $83.3 billion, but Oxfam's calculations again revealed a significantly lower "true value." By 2022, wealthy nations claimed to have mobilized $115.9 billion, including $92 billion in public finance, yet Oxfam's assessment indicates the actual value was at most $35 billion[33]. Despite their historical responsibility for the climate crisis and their obligation to support developing countries, wealthy countries continue to shirk accountability, exacerbating debt burdens in the Global South. Oxfam estimates that over 70% of climate finance provided to developing countries is delivered as loans, deepening their debt crisis despite their negligible contribution to global emissions.

The climate finance needs of low- and middle-income countries—for adaptation, mitigation, and loss and damage—are estimated at $2.7 trillion annually through 2030.[34] This figure reflects immediate needs alone. When factoring in the climate debt owed by wealthy countries to the Global South, the annual requirement approaches $5 trillion. When factoring in the climate debt owed by wealthy countries to the Global South, the annual requirement approaches $5 trillion. Yet, at COP29 in 2024, rich countries committed to mobilizing only $300 billion per year—a fraction of the nearly $3 trillion needed by African nations alone to implement their Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) by 2030.[35]

Compounding this shortfall, climate finance fails to reach the world's poorest communities effectively. Between 2021 and 2022, only 8.6% of climate-related concessional development finance was directed to countries with the highest extreme poverty rates.[36]

Furthermore, 93% of climate finance from high-income countries is drawn from existing Official Development Assistance (ODA). [37.] meaning planned aid cuts will directly reduce climate finance. This practice undermines the "polluter pays" principle, unfairly shifting the burden of climate costs onto developing nations. African countries, already grappling with high debt levels, face increased financial strain, may be forced into riskier and costlier borrowing to address climate shocks.

Critically, climate finance should be additional to ODA, which is essential for funding vital services such as health, food, and education. Given wealthy countries' responsibility for the climate crisis, climate finance must not compete with development assistance but should be provided separately to avoid diverting resources from other critical needs.

Moreover, a number of climate finance projects, funded by rich countries, that are often counted towards meeting their commitments to global climate finance commitments can at times be detrimental to the wellbeing of local communities in Africa. For instance, green hydrogen initiatives in Tunisia focus on producing green hydrogen for export to Europe while the country faces a significant energy deficit.[38] Additionally, these projects have raised concerns about community access to water resources, as well as land grabbing and displacement.

Such projects also reinforce the economic dependence of African countries who will continue to export low-cost raw materials while importing high-added-value technologies. A recent analysis by Oxfam, Eurodad, and Counter Balance reveals that a number of EU sponsored international climate- related projects, under the label of the Global Gateway strategy, often exacerbate inequalities and negatively impact the wellbeing of those living in low-and middle-income countries, while benefiting European companies.[39] The dangers of climate finance related projects to exacerbate inequalities in low-and middle-income countries will likely increase as calls for aid and climate finance to mobilize private sector investments increases.

ODA trends have shown that its provision is not aligned with established principles for aid delivery, undermining local actors and African governments

The following section highlights critical ways in which current donor practices deviate from long-standing global commitments for aid effectiveness, through the following dimensions: 1) current ODA allocation trends largely favour donor NGOS, marginalizing local actors; 2) donor behaviour undermines African governments' ability to mobilize resources effectively and ODA to strengthen domestic resource mobilization and public finance management has been woefully inadequate; and 3) the provision of ODA has undermined states' sovereignties as the use of country systems has been tied to conditionalities

1. Current ODA allocation trends largely favour donor NGOS, marginalizing local actors, and current ODA data do not track the multiple layers of ODA disbursement, making it difficult to capture the scale and scope of delivery on localization

The Grand Bargain, a landmark agreement between over 60 of the world's largest donors and humanitarian organizations, and specifically its commitment to localization, acknowledged that those closest to crises are best placed to respond given their deep understanding of local contexts, cultures, and needs. Many donors, including Australia, Denmark, the European Union, Ireland, the Netherlands, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States, prior to 2025 have linked funding to localization priorities and published specific strategies and guidelines towards this.[40]

Even when there was international consensus on localization, donors were not meeting their commitments. For example, Oxfam's and Publish What You Pay's assessment of US development and humanitarian assistance indicated minimal progress on localization goal, with only 4 percent of United States Agency for International Development (USAID) funding going to local actors between 2019 and 2021.[41] ODA data make it difficult to ascertain how much of ODA reaches local actors as the reporting only captures the initial disbursement of ODA to different actors and does not track further disbursements, which may go to local actors. Moreover, comprehensive data on ODA reaching local actors in Africa is sparse. However, global studies highlight how little foreign aid reaches local, grassroots actors. Global data on humanitarian assistance funding show that the share of direct assistance going to local and national actors was 1.2 percent in 2022.[42]

The failure to fulfil localization commitments has already hindered the effectiveness and equity of aid delivery by sidelining local actors who are best positioned to drive context-specific solutions and influence their' country's development priorities. In the current context, aid cuts will withhold critical resources from communities in Africa who are facing humanitarian crises, climate breakdown, and inequality. The declining focus on aid that supports the socioeconomic inclusion of marginalized groups and the growing discussions around mobilizing aid to leverage private sector investments, including the private sector of rich countries, increase the risk of further marginalizing local groups and communities, and prevent them from being able to voice dissent, demand accountability, and shape their own futures.

2. Donor behaviour undermines African governments' ability to mobilize resources effectively. ODA for domestic resource mobilization and public finance management has been woefully inadequate

Though ODA remains a critical source of budget for some African countries, domestic revenues account for over two-thirds of total financial resources in sub-Saharan Africa.[43] Initiatives like the Addis Tax Initiative and the Platform for Collaboration on Tax have been instrumental in promoting the catalytic role of domestic resource mobilization (DRM). However, there is relatively limited ODA directed toward building DRM or providing budget support; in 2023, nearly US$1.2 billion was spent on administrative costs of processing ODA to Africa in contrast to a little over US$996 million on supporting its public finance management (PFM) and nearly U$423 million for DRM.[44] Despite the critical need to strengthen DRM given its crucial financing role in supporting public services and systems critical for reducing poverty and inequality, on average only 0.6 percent of ODA in Africa went toward DRM between 2018 and 2023.[45] Moreover, ODA for PFM is increasingly allocated in the form of loans, from 25 percent in 2018 to 73 percent in 2023, indicating donors' waning commitment to supporting public financial systems.[46]

Conspicuously, the current tax gap in Africa was estimated at 3 percent of its gross domestic product (GDP) or US$72 billion in revenue in 2019.[4] The tax gap corresponds to the annual losses in revenues for the continent in illicit financial flows, which is 3.7 percent of its total GDP, equivalent to US$88.6 billion.[5] This amount is more than the combined total inflows of foreign direct investment and official development assistance for the period between 2020 to 2022 and is about half of what Africa needs to achieve sustainable development.[47] As such, there is critical need to increase ODA toward PFM and DRM and to stop tax avoidance by multinational corporations and high net-worth individuals. It is essential to complement and bolster ODA for PFM and DRM with political support for global cooperation to stem the flow of illicit financial flows to ensure sustainable long-term development financing for Africa.

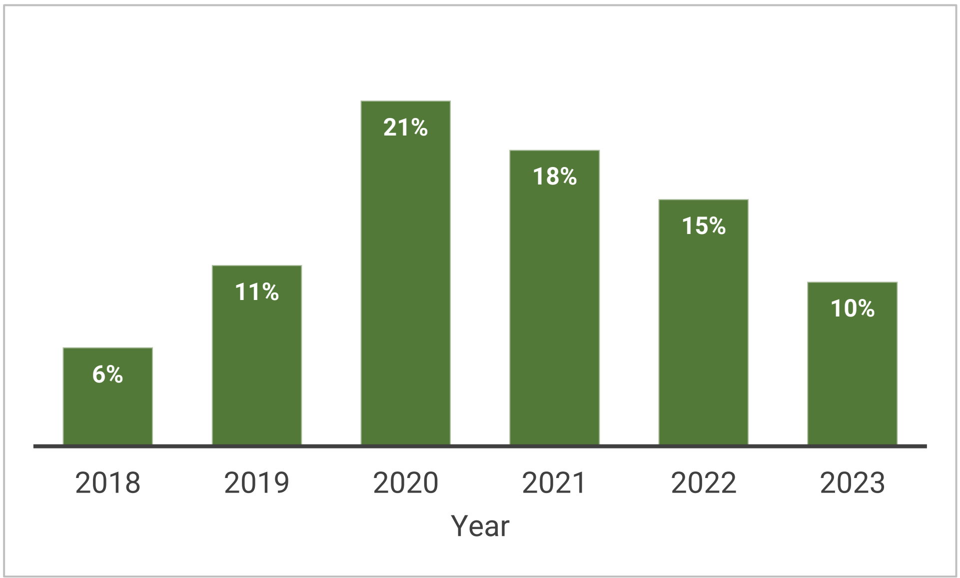
DRM is more important than ever in today's context in which a number of African governments are explicitly discussing the need for DRM and strengthening public finance systems. It is crucial that global cooperation prioritizes support to DRM systems and that country tax initiatives target the wealthy rather than the poor and working class.

3. The provision of ODA has undermined states' sovereignties as the use of country systems has been tied to conditionalities

The International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the European Commission have previously utilized country systems to respond to the financial and debt crises exacerbated in African countries by the COVID-19 pandemic. However, these institutions have conditioned aid support around specific policy reforms that increase economic pressures and violate social contracts in these countries.[48]

Moreover, less than 6 percent of ODA is disbursed directly into national budgets, and budget support is on the decline since the introduction of the Global Partnership for Effective Development Cooperation (GPEDC).[49] Data from the OECD indicate that ODA toward budget support in Africa significantly increased during the onset of COVID-19, from 11 percent in 2019 to 21 percent in 2020, and declined from 2021 to 2023 (from 18 percent to 10 percent).[50] This underscores that in a moment of crisis, governments were best suited to allocate aid and that ODA can be funnelled through budget support. However, the subsequent decline underscores the lack of commitment by donors to ensuring ODA is allocated for budget support.[51] Budget support has been proven to be effective in enhancing the role of the state in promoting sustainable industrial and social policies as well as providing public investments. See Figure 2.

Figure 2: Budget support allocation as a proportion of total ODA in Africa, 2018–2023.



Source: Authors' calculation based on OECD-CRS data

Notes: A bar chart showing that percentage allocation of total ODA to budget support in Africa from 2018- 2023. Budget support was high in 2020 (during the COVID-19 pandemic) but reduced from 2021, moving closer to pre-COVID levels.

The failure to uphold commitments to strengthen and utilize country systems has left African countries increasingly vulnerable, particularly as the threat of further aid cuts looms. The global financial architecture must reorient development finance to genuinely support country ownership through increasing direct budget support, aligning with national priorities, and moving away from conditionalities that limit democratic policymaking.

Recalling the promise of global cooperation and solidarity

The current breakdown of the aid system underscores its fragility and the persistent imbalance in decision-making power within global cooperation frameworks. Despite the significant failings of the system to uphold many of the core principles of effective development cooperation, these principles nonetheless embody a vital spirit of collective action to address shared global challenges. Global challenges around climate change, poverty, and inequality cannot be addressed only by individual countries acting in their own interests; they demand renewed global solidarity and cooperation that is in everyone's interest. The international community must work to rebuild and recall the spirit of global cooperation. It must do so in a way that rectifies, rather than replicates, the power imbalances and systemic failures that have hindered progress to date.

Critical to this effort is ensuring renewed commitments to the following:

1. Deliver aid that effectively targets poverty and inequality by increasing disbursement to LDCs and targeting social sectors most critical to poverty alleviation.

2. Deliver ODA to grassroots, local women's rights organizations in Africa and develop more nuanced gender indicators so that commitments to gender equality can be effectively tracked.

3. Rich countries must increase and deliver on their climate finance pledges through accessible and grant-based instruments to African countries in a manner that does not retrench inequalities between and within countries.

4. Deliver ODA to local groups and communities in Africa so that they are able to shape their own futures and hold their governments accountable.

5. Deliver ODA to support African governments' ability to strengthen domestic resource mobilization and public finance management.

6. Strengthen the use of country systems and increase ODA for budget support to strengthen African governments' sovereignties.

7. Rebuild global cooperation frameworks to address power imbalances and ensure aid is delivered equitably and effectively.

Notes

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[21] Authors' calculations based on OECD CRS data.

[22] Authors' calculations based on OECD CRS data.

[23] Authors' calculations based on OECD CRS data.

[24] It was 45 percent in 2018, 42 percent in 2019, 43 percent in 2020, 46 percent in 2021, 46 percent in 2022, and 43 percent in 2023.

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[46] Authors' calculation based on OECD-CRS data.

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[50] Authors' calculations based on OECD-CRS data.

[51] Authors' calculations based on OECD-CRS data.

About Oxfam

Oxfam is a global movement of people who are fighting inequality to end poverty and injustice. We are working across regions in more than 70 countries, with thousands of partners, and allies, supporting communities to build better lives for themselves, grow resilience and protect lives and livelihoods also in times of crisis. Please write to any of the agencies for further information or visit www.oxfam.org.

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